



Review of Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity

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Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity. *William Kuskín*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. xv+278.

The generative idea of this book is as follows: texts conjure their voice magically, through deeply inventive, Escheresque sleights of technical hand that embed authority in the past even as they displace the past so as to produce that marvel - the sense of a living voice in the present, issuing live off the dead page. Texts invent themselves as from within the compacted protocols of a continuous tradition, and the effect is miraculous.

Kuskin does not himself put it quite this way; instead, he enlists the account of divine vision as given by Boethius' Philosophy: God sees all things simultaneously. Books "inhabit multiple temporalities - the imagined past of writing, the present of reading, other moments of reading recollected - that their readers inhabit simultaneously. From this spiraling energy of production emerges an intelligence, a voice, that transcends time itself" (36). That lyrical account describes the effect of Martial's brilliant and witty self-promoting epigram ("*Qui tecum cupis esse meos ubicumque libellos*"); the other point where Kuskin rises to near-lyrical expression of the book's central idea is in the final paragraph: "The literary imagination allows a powerful time travel, one that constructs the self from the forms of the past and, in so doing, breathes life into time" (208).

In practice the readings produced from this idea look rather like readings produced from studies of intertextuality, with the difference that we are here dealing

with the material history of the book rather than with the text as a disembodied phenomenon. Instead, that is, of accounts of how texts are generated by reference to a web of previous texts, the book historian presents an account of how the material form of the book is deeply reliant on the material protocols of previous books. Rather than looking in the work, the book historian looks at the text, and often at the frontispiece. The resulting stories are involuted, stories whose premise is that *individuum est ineffabile*, or that the new is the old.

So far so good, say I. Kuskin, however, does not want to leave the matter there. His ambitions are very much wider. Before I delineate and evaluate the true ambition of this book, let me describe the shape and contents of the book's body in chapters 2 through 5, headed respectively: "The Poet: Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and the Construction of Modernity" ("Spenser constructs Lydgate as a tertiary writer in the *Shepherd's Calendar*" (53)); "The Dramatic Quarto: Recursion in William Shakespeare's 2 *Henry VI*" ("Shakespeare constructs himself as an author by constructing the fifteenth century" (125)); "Form: William Caxton's *Recuyell* and William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*" ("Shakespeare's main source for *Troilus and Cressida* is...William Caxton's *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*" (131)); "The Edition: Assembly Programs and the Protocols of Canonization" ("The Pavier Quartos complicate the intertwined notions of originality, modernity and historical break by locating in historical precedent the same material and discursive practices of the literary culture they depend on to reproduce Shakespeare anew" (172)).

To be sure, one could argue with many of these contentions: Lydgate's *Troy Book* is, for example, a much more persuasive structural model for *Troilus and Cressida* than Caxton's *Recuyell*. To be sure, the argument sometimes veers into the platitude that print adopted the protocols of the manuscript book. But these chapters each contribute to a deeper understanding of how fifteenth-century writing is absorbed in to the texture of the later sixteenth century.

That I have been hedging with regard to the book's larger ambition may be clear, wishing as I have been to emphasize the valuable book history here, which revives dormant, apparently dead fifteenth-century literature into a living relation with its more famous, and evidently more vital sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century followers. It's time however, for me to stop hedging and start evaluating the weak aspects of this book. They are as follows: (i) its wholly unpersuasive attempt to displace periodization with a continuous book-historical historiography; (ii) its account of scholarship on periodization over the last 15 years; and (iii) its totalizing claim to establish a normative literary historiographical mode from book history. Kuskin's core idea is a good one; the exceptionally ambitious uses to which he puts it are in my view bad ones.

The larger, exceptionally ambitious claims are articulated primarily in the Introduction and Chapter 1 ("Machine Language"). I shall leave aside Kuskin's account of recursive origins and focus now only on his treatment of periodization. Literary history driven from within periodic convictions "assert[s] totalizing divisions that insist that things come from themselves" (5); "By laying aside the dictates of chronology and

period, we can understand literary history as neither progressive nor revolutionary but as a story of influence in which the past is never completely superseded by the present but is instead embedded in the within every literary page..." (20). By this account, nothing ever changes. History effectively doesn't happen. The fascinating, resurgent continuities of cultural practice, everywhere visible in the sixteenth century, happen against no backdrop of radical sixteenth-century cultural change (this book makes no reference to the Reformation), but happen because that's the way all book history just is; we can tell the story wholly from within the terms of (I was about to say literary, but no) book historical study. The chapter headings are significant in this regard, restricted as they are to wholly literary and book historical categories. Those chapter titles, no less than their body, make no reference to history or ambient culture. This is, designedly, a specifically book historical history. The absences of other categories are, however, by no means merely the product of a designedly narrow, perhaps modest bibliographical vision, nor are they untheorized; on the contrary, in the book's larger ambition, they would claim to stake out a normative historiographical practice.

Kuskin's account of periodizing, literary historical scholarship over the last 25 years does not in any case correspond to his account of what's wrong with periodization. His own theme of recursiveness might have led him to be properly recursive with regard to that vital corpus of scholarship, which has witnessed much work, none of which sees "a linear and progressive history of authorship, in which each author improves on the next...so that the past is sealed away" (85), as Kuskin would have it, and none of which asserts "totalizing divisions that insist that things come from

themselves" (5). Kuskin's eagerness to extend the reach of his core observation leads him into non-recursive (read distorted) accounts of recent work. *Contra* Kuskin, this scholarship does not assert totalizing breaks; the totalizer is rather Kuskin himself, who would have us all practice a book history shorn of anything but material and rhetorical categories. This looks like an impoverished account of cultural history to me.

I might add that many sentences lose traction through extended senses of technical terms. Take, for example: "In contrast, Shakespearean drama embeds history into the overall genre – the literary dramatic quarto – as a formal principle, a trope" (91). "Trope," indeed (under attack from all sides, it's true) is subject to especial strangulation: reiteration and amplification are, for example, not "tropes" (118).

My own work is consistently subject to mischaracterization of the 180 degree kind. I will not belabor that point, but note only in passing that Kuskin disorders the title of my *Reform and Cultural Revolution* and mis-transcribes the dates of its span (22). Book historians should not do that.

James Simpson

Harvard University